

POPULAR MUSIC & SOCIETY  
22/2 1998

## Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music: Consumer Perspectives and Academic Interpretation

Peter Manuel

Issues of gender have inspired some of the most insightful and lively scholarly literature on popular music in the last decade. The best of this literature has reflected the insight, now familiar in cultural studies, that the meanings of a text, rather than being inherent in a work or hypodermically injected into consumers' minds, are co-produced by consumers. Accordingly, audience uses and gratifications, patterns of reception and consumption, and associated social practices have been recognized as integral to any holistic study of popular music. Actual studies of consumption, however, have lagged behind such insights in terms of quality and quantity. Moreover, much of the extant literature on reception, however insightful, still consists of academic speculation ungrounded in consumer perspectives.

Scholarly literature on Caribbean popular music can be seen to reflect these concerns in various ways. Some of the most important recent publications on Caribbean popular music have focused on gender, including that of Pacini Hernandez (*Bachata*) on Dominican *bachata*, Aparicio on salsa, Rohlehr on calypso, and Cooper on Jamaican dancehall. While Pacini Hernandez's approach is broadly ethnographic and richly grounded in social history, the other authors are scholars of literature who approach their subject primarily via the prism of song lyrics. Although each of these works reflects the author's theoretical sophistication, keen insights, and intimate familiarity with the culture in question, their often acute interpretations and thorough research do not, on the whole, incorporate extensive references to the perspectives of the people who actually consume and enjoy the music in question.<sup>1</sup>

The general paucity of reception studies of popular music can be attributed in part to the difficulty of gathering opinions on subjective topics like identity and gender which do not lend themselves to questionnaires, statistical analyses, or any form of positivist mass study. Accordingly, data yielded on Caribbean music by reception studies using such formats (e.g., Douglas, Anderson and Langley) have tended to be rather predictable and unremarkable, although not without interest and validity.

Ultimately more productive may be approaches that solicit consumer perspectives in more flexible and open-ended formats, however more subjective and personal their interpretation may be. This article employs a version of the latter methodology, exploring aspects of gender politics in Caribbean music as expressed in oral and written statements elicited from a set of Caribbean-American students at a working-class college in New York City. Attention is focused on the attitudes of female students toward controversial song texts, and, to a lesser extent, on dance-floor behavior as another arena of social reception and practice. Such consumers' views can be seen to address some of the most salient issues in current gender studies, while dramatizing the often problematic and contradictory relationship between lay and academic interpretations.

In Caribbean popular music, there is no shortage of songs whose representations of gender, from a North American liberal or left perspective, would seem controversial, if not overtly patriarchal or misogynist. In genres as disparate as calypso, bolero, and reggae one finds denunciations of women for their alleged faithlessness, moral degeneracy, and ugliness.<sup>2</sup> While men boast of their sexual conquests and demand that women submit to them,<sup>3</sup> they denounce promiscuous women and rail against perceivably false accusations of paternity.<sup>4</sup> Male irresponsibility is celebrated, and women are repeatedly portrayed as valuable only for sex.<sup>5</sup> Jamaican dance-hall deejays typically clarify that they offer women only sex, rather than commitment, while at the same time deriding as prostitutes women who demand some material compensation for their favors.<sup>6</sup> Trinidadian calypsos, Puerto Rican *plenas*, and other songs have portrayed women as trying to tie men down with black magic (obeah, *brujería*).<sup>7</sup> A few songs have urged men to keep their women in line and even gain their love by beating them.<sup>8</sup> Many songs have articulated a paradigmatic dichotomy between the respectable yet devalued wife and the sexy and seductive mistress—in West Indian parlance, the wifey vs. the matey or deputy, or in Spanish, the *señora* vs. the *mujer de la calle* ("woman of the street," quintessentially a *mulata*).<sup>9</sup> And if Latin music clearly inclines more toward sentimental romance and genteel idealization of women in contrast to dance-hall's prevailingly hedonistic machismo, there are many traditional Latin boleros which denounce women as *mentirosas*, *traidoras*, and *abusadoras* (liars, cheats, and abusers; see especially Aparicio). Such overtly sexist themes may be found in only a minority of Caribbean songs, and are markedly less representative of Latin music; nevertheless, they represent a significant subset, and one that, in its accumulation over generations, has come to constitute a substantial body of music.

*Consumer Responses: Methodology and Context*

If the sexism in many such song lyrics may seem readily apparent, interpreting their social significance is actually far from simple. A conscientious analysis of such music must take care not to overgeneralize from unrepresentative samples, and to recognize the often contradictory relationships between expressive discourses like popular song and actual gender relations and attitudes. Most important is the need to contextualize lyrics in their broader cultural milieu, and to consider consumer interpretations and the social practices embedding reception. Basic to such an approach is the recognition that the social meaning of a song cannot be unproblematically "read off" the lyrics by an analyst, however well-versed in modern literary theory he or she may be.

Given the complexities involved, it goes without saying that a thorough and holistic discussion of gender in Caribbean music, or even in any single sub-genre therein, is well beyond the scope of a short essay. What this article can contribute is a sense of the range of female consumer responses to provocative song texts, and an appraisal of the relationship of such responses to scholarly theorizations of gender in general. The core set of informants in this study consists of the more than two hundred Caribbean-American students who have taken my Caribbean music classes taught over the last four years at a proletarian college in the City University of New York system. In the course of teaching this class, I quickly found gender to be a successful and heuristic topic both for class discussion and term papers. Student interest in the subject is consistently high, and students have been able to illuminate discussions with their own often intimate familiarity with favored genres of contemporary Caribbean popular music. Although my introduction of gender issues in class has been for pedagogical reasons rather than for my own research, I have retained much of the content of student discussions and written work, in several cases informing students that I might like to anonymously quote their comments, with their permission. Aside from class discussions, student attitudes were revealed most extensively in term paper assignments, which required students to discuss gender representations in a given genre of music with respect to certain themes (such as objectification and concepts of the gaze) outlined in textbook readings.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt that the nature of the opinions and attitudes voiced by these students was, to some extent, conditioned by the specific context in which they were solicited, including such factors as the phrasing of the essay assignment, my framings of classroom discussions, and the power dynamics of the student-teacher relationship. (However, these dynamics—including my own often transparently liberal views—did not

32 · *Popular Music and Society*

stop students from expressing provocative and controversial opinions.<sup>11</sup>) In outlining certain student viewpoints here, I am further mediating them, while remaining sensitive to the dangers of ventriloquism involved when a privileged white male attempts to represent the opinions of working-class minority men and women. Further, in their commitment to higher education, the students may also constitute a distinctive, rather than quintessentially representative, set of informants. At the same time, they are not atypical consumers, consisting of urban working-class men and women, between the ages of seventeen to forty, most of whom are first- or second-generation migrants from the Spanish- and English-speaking Caribbean. Most come from proletarian families with little or no experience with higher education. Finally, most have been avid consumers of Caribbean popular musics, and many attend dance clubs regularly. For the purposes of this paper, I have focused on the views expressed by female Caribbean-American students, particularly in reaction to such arguably sexist and patriarchal song themes as outlined above.

*Hearing and Listening*

The diversity of student attitudes toward controversial popular songs starkly reveals the limitations of purely textual-based readings, whether conducted by critics or defenders of popular music. Student responses reflected not only the variety of possible interpretations of lyrics, but also the different levels at which the text can be apprehended or effectively ignored. Indeed, it is a feature of musical polysemy that audiences can react in diverse ways to different aspects of a given piece, in accordance with individual predisposition, listening contexts, and other factors. Most Caribbean popular music is in fact dance music, in which the literal meaning of the text may be functionally secondary to purely musical aspects providing rhythmic drive. Accordingly, students testified that they often ignore lyrics to songs, especially in the quintessential listening context of the dance floor. As one Puerto Rican student wrote, "When I listen to music I judge it by the beats and the rhythms first, then maybe I would listen to the lyrics, and although they may be sexist I would still listen to it." Another concurred, "I like this music because of how it sounds, not because I agree with the message it sends."

In other cases, such as the more word-oriented Latin rap and Jamaican dance-hall, students often acknowledged the importance of the lyrics, while implying that such verses functioned more as rhetoric than as semantic statements. In class discussions of such songs, students often acknowledged how the text, with its rich alliterations, internal rhymes, and rhythmic delivery, contributed to the kinetic drive of the music; at

*Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music* · 33

the same time, they often seemed to regard the literal "message" of the text as insignificant.<sup>12</sup> Such an orientation would explain how lyrics could be rhetorically original and expressive while adhering to stock themes (such as boasting, or glorification of sex).

Choosing to apprehend the lyrics of a song semantically adds another dimension of musical meaning, with its own ideological and aesthetic concerns. As one Jamaican dance-hall fan wrote,

A listener does not have to understand what the deejays are saying, because the beats alone are sufficient to fulfill one's music needs. However, when a listener does understand what the artists are saying, this music can take on a whole different meaning.

Accordingly, several students wrote articulately of their dilemma of loving certain songs as dance music while resenting their lyrics. Speaking of the recent Dominican *merengue* hit "La Tanga" (The G-String), one Dominican wrote, "I will be the first to admit that to dance to, this song has a great beat, but how degrading is it for me to dance to a song that is so chauvinistic?" As another wrote, "It's funny how you can be so disgusted with something and like it so much."

If song lyrics on the dance floor are often ignored, the same texts, when heard in other contexts, may receive considerable attention. Several students related how they and their acquaintances often discussed songs and their lyrics. A few mentioned how phrases from popular songs had become familiar colloquial expressions, such as the Haitian term "fem colloquit," denoting an avaricious and manipulative woman, which derives from a 1970s song by Coupé Cloué. Several Latino students referred to incidents sparked by song lyrics, such as alleged murders in Puerto Rico supposedly provoked by men being taunted as "venado" or cuckold, in the wake of Ramon Orlando's popular *merengue* by that name. (In local folklore, the horns of the *venado*, or stag, grow when it is being cuckolded.) Such incidents would attest not only to the importance song lyrics can have in certain contexts, but also to the way that they can be actively recycled and recontextualized in the realm of social practice.

*(Mis)reading Texts*

One issue raised by the diversity of students' attitudes involved the relation between authorial intent and audience interpretation. Consumers' readings of song texts often contradict not only each other, but the meaning originally encoded by the author himself, whose "death" is accordingly proverbial. In my own classes, such questions arose particu-

34 · Popular Music and Society

larly in relation to readings of ambiguous song texts. Caribbean popular music lyrics abound in ribald puns and *doble-sentido* innuendoes, to the extent that listeners become accustomed to assuming that virtually any inscrutable verse is in fact a sexual double entendre. In most cases, they are correct in doing so, and after having knowledgeable listeners explain to me the sexual metaphors in a number of otherwise incomprehensible lyrics, I myself have naturally become predisposed to look for such meanings whenever in doubt. (In common parlance, this is called having a dirty mind.)

In one of my classes we had listened to a 1950s song by Cuban bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez, entitled "Hachero pa'un Palo," whose enigmatic text, excerpted below, describes the inability of axmen to chop down a mysterious tree.

What strange power does this tree [*palo*] have,  
that no one can chop it down?  
So many axemen have tried to chop it  
and have given up and gone  
Perhaps it's made of *guayacán*,  
... or perhaps it's Congolese, or perhaps it's bone  
Seventy-two axmen on one tree ...

One Latino young man stated, winking and chuckling, that the singer was boasting of his sexual stamina, and indeed the song does seem to resemble others in this category, such as the Dominican *bachata* "El Ser-rucho," by Juan Bautista (qtd. in Pacini Hernandez, "Music" 372):

I have a very strong tree, no one can knock it down  
More than three hundred women came to the challenge  
They sawed for a while, but not one succeeded.

In fact, Arsenio's song is a fairly direct adaptation of a chant associated with the Afro-Cuban religion called *palo*; the *palo*, or tree, in the song is a metaphor for the magical powers its practitioners may command (see Vélez 2:217, 225).

Analytic interpretations of such (mis)readings would range from a traditional literary aesthetic privileging the author's supposed intent as the only legitimate interpretation, to a solipsistic relativism regarding all audience interpretations, no matter how absurd or unlikely, as equally valid. Perhaps more productive, although not without problems, would be the analytic model proposed by Stuart Hall, distinguishing the various moments of encoding and decoding mediated meanings and according

11 Rodríguez

3 2

7

As for the numerous songs, from boleros to dance-hall hits, which deprecate women variously as *mentirosas*, skettles (Jamaican patois for "sluts"), bitches and 'hos, and the like, several students stated that they simply did not take such insults seriously. As one West Indian wrote, "Sometimes my friends and I laugh at such lyrics. If I were to take everything that was said negatively about women in songs, I think I would be a very uptight person." Other students shrugged off such epithets as clearly relating to persons other than themselves. One woman wrote, "Instead of feeling degraded I feel happy that I am not them and I make it a lesson not to be like them." Another concurred,

I know that the artists are talking about the kind of chicken-head women who surround them, and I know what kind of woman I am. It is just music to me, but if some man were to call me a derogatory word, then that is a different story.

Such responses would seem at least superficially to corroborate what appears to be the rappers' standard clarification of misogynist epithets: "They know who they are."<sup>13</sup>

A number of West Indian women explicitly related their indulgent and tolerant attitudes to their economic independence from men. One wrote:

I personally do not take offense at such lyrics . . . I feel that I am secure enough in my identity as a woman not to let such lyrics offend me, especially being that I am an independent woman who has always taken care of myself.

Implicit in such tolerant reactions is the recognition that song lyrics do not represent social relations per se, but rather attitudes about them—and predominantly male ones at that. Students may realize that some expressions of misogyny in popular music may be indicative less of the actual social subjugation of women than of angry male backlash and resentment against genuine female emancipation. Thus, for example, Pacini Hernandez (*Bachata* ch. 5) insightfully correlates the embittered sexism of several 1970s *bachatas* with the breakdown of urbanizing families and the subsequent financial independence—willful or not—of many single women. Similarly, the prodigious amount of overt misogyny in dance-hall might indicate a *greater*, rather than lesser, degree of female autonomy in Jamaican society, as opposed, for example, to much of Latin American society. Indeed, evidence suggests that such factors as inheritance laws and the looser, more pragmatic family structures in Jamaica have, over the generations, created traditions of resilience and self-sufficiency among women (see Anderson and Langley 26-27).

them each a "relative autonomy," as conditioned by broader structures of meaning. This model would thus accommodate the "preferred meaning" of the author, while according a certain legitimacy to the ribald (mis)-reading of the text—especially insofar as that reading coheres to extant interpretive norms or "structures of meaning."

Hall's "structures of meaning" may naturally change over time, such that, for example, a sexual interpretation of a song may indeed become the dominant reading. A similar student interpretation involved Bob Marley's 1970s reggae song "Small Axe," whose equally elliptical text describes the felling of a large tree with a hatchet. While the lyrics may have originally referred to producer Lee Perry's challenge to larger record companies (see White 224), in the heyday of Rastafarianism and the Jamaican socialist mobilization of the 1970s this lyric also lent itself to interpretation as a utopian sociopolitical metaphor for the eventual triumph of the subaltern "sufferers." Yet by the late 1990s we are in a different world order, in which Jamaica's heady aspirations to economic autonomy have been definitively quashed and the messianic idealism of roots reggae has given way to dance-hall's glib crudity ("slackness"). In dance-hall, as in much hardcore rap music, male boasting and the portrayal of women only as sex objects have in fact become stock themes, contrasting markedly with the utopianism of 1970s reggae and the upbeat sentimentality of '60s soul music. In the pithy words of one Jamaican student, "Dance-hall deejays sing about everything from politics to punanny. Mostly punanny" ["pussy"]. With the changing milieu comes a new hermeneutic, reflected by the interpretation of "Small Axe" insisted upon by one Jamaican student, that the song referred to "a man in bed with a big woman."

#### *Facing the Music*

The patriarchal ideologies refracted and promoted, whether implicitly or blatantly, by such Caribbean songs as those mentioned above pose obvious dilemmas for women who are not only inundated with but often fond of such music. My own female students revealed a variety of interpretive stances which enabled them to enjoy ideologically problematical songs without feeling torn by indignation.

Some students articulated various nonaesthetic "uses and gratifications" derived from male-oriented songs and videos. One woman related that derogatory, hedonistic songs "let us know what guys are all about and warn us to be on the lookout." Several others stated that regardless of their attitudes toward perceivably sexist music videos, they and their female acquaintances watched the women in them in order to keep up with fashions and know what to buy.

ed *ed* *ed*



While men voice their frustrations and fantasies in song, women in the West Indies (i.e., former British colonies) might not prefer to sacrifice their form of independence for the traditionally narrower lifestyle options in Hispanic societies. Accordingly, they may be particularly willing to shrug off the deejays' macho bragging and hedonistic fantasies.

Students also attested to another aesthetic stance which enabled them to disarm and enjoy certain superficially sexist texts, in the form of the widespread phenomenon of cross-gender identification by listeners. Thus, for example, in discussing a very typical Dominican *bachata* portraying the heartbroken male drowning his sorrows in liquor and cursing the treacherous woman who betrayed him,<sup>14</sup> several Dominican young women readily asserted that, rather than being offended by such songs, they generally enjoyed them. The students indicated that they appreciated the male vulnerability expressed by the singer, and, perhaps more tellingly, that in listening they would simply identify with the abstract emotions of longing and heartbreak expressed by the singer. One wrote, "As for the depressing bachatas that contain lyrics of unfaithful women and heartbreak, anyone can identify with them." The ability of women to listen in this fashion explains in part why *boleros*, *bachatas*, and *rancheras*, many of which denounce women in terms similar to this song, are particularly popular among women.

In general, the practice of transcending gender indications to identify with the song's narrator is a complex and nearly universal custom, although conditioned by several factors. Songs can be gendered in various ways and to various degrees, depending on semantic content, grammatical indications, aesthetic and social conventions, the gender of the singer and the composer, and other factors. Sentimental love songs are particularly likely not to be strongly gendered in their text content, so that listeners can easily transcend the overt and superficial gendering that is present. Even songs that are somewhat more explicit in their gendering, such as the bolero in question, can often be listened to in such a cross-gendered manner. Thus, for example, a male listening to Janis Joplin sing "I need a man to love me" need not be gay in order to appreciate the universal, ungendered sentiments of desire she expressed.

Such psychic transvestitism is in fact intrinsic to certain genres (see e.g., Morgan; Koskoff 11). In North Indian music, for example, erotic folk and light genres like *thumri* are always sung from the female persona, while the related Urdu *ghazal* is always voiced from the male perspective; both genres are sung and enjoyed by both men and women, who, it is assumed, will ignore the various forms of gender specificity in the performance to focus on the abstract emotions expressed (see, e.g., Manuel, *Cassette* 203-07). In some respects, these practices can be seen

to reflect the patriarchy of Indian society; in other ways, however, they may constitute simply autonomous aesthetic conventions.

In general, whether in female readings of *bachata* or of Urdu *ghazal*, the common practice of cross-gender identification poses significant challenges to interpretation. A disparaging analysis would argue that the adoption of the male gaze by female consumers is basic to most forms of modern popular culture and is ultimately degrading to women insofar as they subliminally internalize the text's androcentricity (see, e.g., Mulvey). More recent feminist scholarship, however, has posited that consumers' ability to adopt multiple subject positions calls for a more flexible and nuanced interpretation of gender representations (see, e.g., Gamman and Marshment). Ultimately, the clarification of these issues may rest on more extensive reception studies.

While spectator positions may often be complex and multivalent, there is no doubt that certain consumers find some songs unambiguously offensive. In many such cases, the gendering of a song is so concrete and overt as to impede cross-gender identification. Thus, a female listener might well have difficulty assuming the subject position in Beenie Man's "Yaw Yaw," in which the deejay boasts of having impregnated several women and sings admiringly of a friend who has twelve children who are still teething.<sup>16</sup> As many of my female students are single mothers, it is not surprising that several singled out Beenie Man's songs as particularly objectionable. Similarly, one Trinidadian wrote poignantly of West Indian women who migrate to the United States to work and send money home, where their male friends hang out, drink beer, listen to songs degrading women, and then tell their women upon their return, "O darling, you know it's just jokey-jokey." Another woman related how she was raised from childhood to accept a subservient and dependent relationship with men, to "know her place"—specifically, the kitchen—and to believe that if she caught her man cheating, then she should "just accept it and be grateful that you have a man." Such, indeed, is the explicit credo of Lord Shorty's calypso "Sixteen Commandments":

Thou shalt have no other man but me . . .  
If thou see me wid a nex' girl talkin', try and understand  
Pass me straight like you ain't know me,  
let me have my woman.

If many Caribbean women do indeed follow Shorty's instructions, several of my female students voiced their contempt for such ideologies, often indicating a preference for more sentimental songs portraying vulnerable and amorous men. In the realm of Dominican *bachata*, this taste

would typically involve favoring the romantic songs of Juan Luis Guerra over the *doble sentido* ribaldry of Blas Duran and the often bitter and recriminatory laments of Leonardo Paniagua. Among Jamaicans, it might entail a preference for the "conscious reggae" of deejays like Sizzla, or even a rejection of dance-hall altogether in favor of contemporary Afro-American rhythm and blues. Other students lamented the pervasive objectification of women in popular music, in the form of the routine fetishization of women's body parts not only in song lyrics but in album covers; one Dominican wrote, "Thank God that the merengue music industry is not big on music videos, because I can't even imagine how their videos would represent women."

### *Returning the Gaze: Female Performers*

Given the ambivalence toward such phenomena, it is not surprising that many female listeners take particular interest in female performers who have established themselves as significant voices in the Caribbean pop music world. Latina students spoke admiringly of salsa songs by Linda "India" Caballero (e.g., "Ese Hombre" [That man]) and Olga Tañón's *merengue* "Es Mentiroso" (He's a liar), which turn the tables on men by denouncing duplicitous and philandering former partners. Somewhat more equivocal praise was voiced for the all-female *merengue* groups like Las Chicas del Can, which, while establishing a female presence in an otherwise male-dominated world, are recognized as products of their male producer-composers (in this case, Wilfrido Vargas). Opinions about Las Chicas del Can also differed as to whether their obligatory appearance in skimpy bikinis was liberating or whether it merely provided, as one student put it, a "jiggle show" for the male gaze. (The performers themselves have voiced quite conflicting opinions about their dress code, which is resented in particular by the sole Anglo instrumentalist.)

Particularly controversial have been the recent set of Jamaican female deejays who have flaunted an unbridled, flamboyant, and often transgressive sexuality. Outstanding in this category are Patra and Lady Saw, who have presented themselves as purely sexual beings, and as perfect consorts for studs like Beenie Man. Lady Saw, whose stage act often includes simulating sex with a band member, clarifies explicitly in her songs that she endorses the male deejays' credo that relationships should be based on casual sex rather than commitment. In several of their songs, Patra and Lady Saw boast in graphic terms of their lovemaking skills, voice their craving for sex, and clarify that they have no use for men who are insufficiently endowed or lacking in sexual stamina.<sup>16</sup>

My female West Indian students expressed mixed views regarding such problematic role models. A few protested the double standard

which traditionally restricted female expressions of sensuality, and several voiced a qualified respect for the new breed of emancipated women, from Patra to rappers Salt 'n' Pepa, who, rather than being passive sex objects, present themselves as fully in control of their exuberant sexuality. As one young woman wrote, "If men can act that way, why can't we?" And as for exploiting sexuality and good looks to gain fame and fortune, or even to survive, one West Indian woman said in class, "Honey, ya use whatever ya got."<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, several students stated that they regarded Patra and Lady Saw as reducing women to the status of bimbos and sex toys and catering to the male deejays' degrading stereotypes. To these students, Patra and her colleagues seem to represent pornographic shows geared toward the howling approval of male audience members rather than images of liberation. Student disagreement on this issue could be seen to replicate some of the feminist debate regarding pornography, voyeurism, and the representation of female sexuality in general (see, e.g., Koskoff 6-7). Clearly, such overt expressions of female sensuality can be inherently contradictory when they are done for the benefit of mixed or predominantly male audiences in commercial mass-mediated genres rampant with sexist objectification.

#### *Dance-floor Politics*

The issue of female expression of independent sexuality also arose in the comments of several students regarding dance-floor behavior. Indeed, the actions of dancers at clubs and concerts constitute a significant aspect of popular music culture, and also can serve as a remarkably immediate and tangible indication of a song's popularity, even on gender-specific levels. Thus, for example, a few Jamaican students noted that a dance-hall song by Beenie Man entitled "Slam" is particularly popular as a dance song among young working-class West Indian women. The lyrics to "Slam" constitute a tribute of sorts to ghetto women, who, in their eagerness or desperation to attract men, allegedly make better lovers:<sup>18</sup>

You have to get a slam from a real ghetto gal  
If you want to know how good lovin' feel

One student wrote that when this song is played at parties, female dancers "put up their hands as a salute to it and wine themselves up [gyrate] more than usual as if they are trying to tell the men 'we're great in bed.'" Despite what many would consider the degrading implications of the song's text, the numerous female fans of this song evidently

choose to interpret it positively as a tribute to their social class, and, perhaps more importantly, as a celebration of female sexuality. Arguably, a certain sort of empowerment might also be implicit in the associated erotic dancing, in which women could be said to taunt men with their desirable sexual skills, over which they themselves retain control. This song might thus represent the kind of "subversive" challenge to bourgeois propriety and passive femininity that, according to Cooper (ch. 8), is posed by dance-hall's "slackness." Alternately, the sexism implicit in the song's dehumanization of women, like dance-hall's virulent homophobia, could be seen not as a flouting of dominant-class values, but rather as reactionary hyperconformity to them.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, some of my students voiced their resentment of the song's suggestion that subaltern women have nothing to offer society but their bodies, and that their primary potential merit is their willingness to please men. Similarly, I have noted that of my more than two hundred informants—including dozens of proletarian West Indians—none ever articulated any sense of class pride associated with lewdness or machismo, nor did anyone suggest a class-based justification for "slackness" as found in dance-hall or other musics. Nevertheless, it may be particularly in the context of the dance floor—rather, for example, than in a college term paper—that the freedom and power associated with autonomous female sensuality can be expressed with relative abandon and impunity.

The ideological contradictions dramatized in such songs and social practices can be seen as inherent to the role of autonomous sensuality in popular music culture. On the one hand, the celebration of sexuality for its own sake can serve to devalue commitment and responsibility, reduce individuals to bodies and body parts, and encourage the sexual exploitation of women. These are not merely narrow puritanical concerns in societies or subcultures marked by the endemic feminization of poverty, high incidence of violence against women, and a situation wherein the declining institution of the family can be seen to exacerbate problems of underachievement, social alienation, criminality, and other pathologies of modern urban life. At the same time, it could well be argued that the dance floor is the one arena in which sensuality can be celebrated in a controlled and even artistically creative context. It is clear that millions of women around the world experience popular music as a liberating and even exhilarating force precisely because it allows them to experience and, through dancing, express their own sexuality, free from the traditional constraints of family, religion, and patriarchy in general. In that sense, the open eroticism of much Caribbean dance music, however rampant with objectification and hedonism, may be essential and arguably liberating. The comments of a Jamaican female student are worth quoting at length:

42 · *Popular Music and Society*

The close sexual dancing or wining that people enjoy doing while listening to dance-hall warrants the sexy lyrics. Dancehall, I feel, is a party genre made to have fun. As couples gyrate against a wall to lyrics like "Wine pon me Gal" and "Flex Girl Time to Have Sex," the content of the song is not offensive, but necessary. If dancehall performers begin to base the contents of their songs on world peace, family life, or even the sweetness of falling in love, the music would lose its edge and popularity. The sexy dancing associated with dancehall music is in fact a part of the music. Thus dancehall would be nothing without its overtly sexy, sometimes sexist, daring, and dirty lyrics.

It is also significant that in Caribbean cultures, women often dance with each other. In many cases, such women might prefer a male partner, and are dancing with a friend or relative only in the temporary absence of a suitable man. However in the contexts of reggae clubs, Trinidadian soca fetes, Carnival, and East Indian chutney, women often prefer to dance with each other and feel liberated by the absence of men to dance in the most uninhibitedly sensual fashion (see Miller 113ff; Manuel, "Chutney"). Insofar as such dancing comprises at least an aspect of female liberation, it illustrates how the social practices embedding music can effectively negate such features as sexist lyrics; thus, even the most misogynist dance-hall song could in some respects come to constitute a soundtrack for the assertion of female autonomy on the dance floor. The numerous references by my students to dance-floor behavior illustrate how that arena may often be a considerably more important site for the enactment of gender politics and the production of meaning than are song lyrics, which have tended to be overprivileged by music scholars exploring gender issues. Even lyrics themselves may be playfully rewritten by dancers in clubs. One student reported: "In the rap song 'Get Money' by Junior Mafia there is one line that says 'fuck bitches, get money.' In all the hip-hop clubs I have been to, this verse is always reworded by women who shout it out as 'fuck niggas, get money.'"

*Conclusions*

Caribbean popular music cultures serve as remarkably dramatic sites for the metaphorical negotiation of gender relations—a negotiation that variously assumes the character of a love fest, a playful flirtation, or a gender war. On the whole, the power relations in this contestation are markedly asymmetrical, with males dominating the fields of popular music performance, the personnel of the industry, and most aspects of the larger social, political, and economic structures as a whole. Accordingly, it could be argued that Caribbean popular music's discursive ideologies as well are largely determined by males. Women attempting to

*Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music* · 43

find meaning, dignity, diversion, and self-expression in these popular musics must do so largely within these parameters. However, the maintenance of hegemony, as has often been noted, is an ongoing process involving constant contestation, shifting strategies, and—in some cases—effective exploitation of spaces and margins by subalterns to challenge domination.

As the accounts of consumers' attitudes and practices illustrate, such contestations and challenges by women can occur in distinct realms of cultural practice. The most extensive of these, no doubt, involve the ways in which consumers of popular music variously critique, resignify, or (de)construct the meanings of cultural texts. The students in this survey revealed some of the variety of interpretive strategies that are, no doubt, commonplace in the Caribbean popular music audience as a whole. As we have seen, female students choose whether to attend to or ignore song lyrics; they adopt various subject positions, including that of the male narrator; they use songs and videos as sources of information about fashion and male intentions; whether knowingly or not, they (mis)read songs in manners reflective of their own contemporary interpretive communities; and, lastly, they often consciously resent sexist texts.

The dance floor constitutes a separate, quite distinct context for the contestation and coproduction of meaning in popular music culture; it is also a context in which the already problematic dichotomies of cultural consumption and production break down. By dancing with each other, selectively choosing male partners, collectively shouting out rewordings of songs and other social practices, female dancers actively negotiate their position in society, albeit on largely symbolic levels. Finally, women are increasingly able to have an impact on popular music culture by actually making music, even if the continued male domination of the entertainment industry is likely to render their products ideologically contradictory. Such contradictions are particularly obvious in the performances of deejays like Patra, which female audiences interpret variously as images of female empowerment or male-gaze pornography.

The very discrepancies in consumers' viewpoints highlight the fact that although they are essential to a holistic study of popular culture, such "emic" accounts must themselves be subject to interpretation. As we have seen, consumer perspectives articulate and parallel some of the central questions and issues which have engrossed scholars of gender, including the nature of the gaze, the relation of authorial intent to received meaning, and the status of autonomous female sexuality in a male-dominated entertainment world. The accounts of consumers and their social practices do not resolve these issues, and in many respects they pose more interpretive questions than they answer. Although

44 · *Popular Music and Society*

insights of poststructuralism and cultural studies have justly left many scholars hesitant to pontificate about the stupefaction of culture consumers, a holistic interpretation, as Radway (15) indicates, must ultimately hope to explore the covert procedures through which meanings are constructed. A populist valorization of all consumer viewpoints may inhibit understanding of the ways in which internalized power structures and ideologies can lead individuals to act and think in ways detrimental to their own interests. The problem of reconciling academic theory and consumer attitudes thus intensifies rather than dissolves.

However, if audience interpretations do not resolve conceptual debates, they remain indispensable objects of consideration, illustrating how consumers constitute nuanced subjectivities rather than demographic aggregates or stupefied automatons. Their study highlights how analyses of "popular music" must properly be expanded to comprehend popular music *culture* as a whole. In the process, the site of investigation must inevitably shift from cultural texts themselves—e.g., song lyrics—to the meanings that audiences construct, the social practices embedding them, and, finally, the ideologies and power relations that condition these phenomena as a whole.

*Notes*

1. Aparicio's study includes a subchapter on consumers' responses, although her data base is limited to eighteen informants in Michigan.

2. E.g., Mighty Sparrow's 1950s calypso "Jean Marabunta" (see Warner 100), and Rafael Cortijo's "Severa" (1950s Puerto Rican *guaracha*).

3. E.g., Buju Banton, "Have to Get Your Body Tonight" ("... even by gunpoint"), or Bounty Killa's "Stucky" (1980s dance-hall).

4. E.g., Mighty Terror's "Chinese Children" and Sparrow's "Child Father" (calypsos; see Warner 97-98), Bounty Killa's "Living Dangerously" (dance-hall), and El Gran Combo's "Me Dicen Papá" (1970s Puerto Rican salsa).

5. E.g., Atilla's "I'll Never Burden Myself with a Wife" (1930s calypso).

6. E.g., Beenie Man, "Old Dog" and "Nuff Gal" (1990s dance-hall), Coupé Cloué "Fem Colloquint," and Miami Top Vice, "Yo Tout Pou Zin" (Haitian *compas/konpa*). In "Old Dog," Beenie Man states that it is simply his nature to need many women, often two or three at a time, and that he even intends to seduce his mother-in-law.

7. E.g., Cortijo's "Huy Que Pote" (1950s Puerto Rican *plena*), and the colonial-era calypsos cited in Rohlehr (258-63).

8. E.g., Mighty Sparrow's "Turn Them Down" (calypso), Hector LaVoe's "Bandolera," Johnny Pacheco's "Préstame los Guantes" (salsa), Daniel Santos' "Yo la Mato" (bolero), and Johnny Ventura's "Dále un Palo" (*merengue*).

2 2  
( )



*Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music* · 45

9. E.g., the recent Dominican *merengue* "La Grua" (The Tow Truck), which depicts the possessive wife dragging her husband away from his girlfriends at the dance club.

10. The assignment generally reads more or less as follows: Read the sections on music and gender in *Caribbean Currents* (Manuel, with Bilby and Largey 197-200, 237-40) and summarize their perspective on colonial-era calypso. Then, using the themes and concepts presented in the reading, discuss how women and male-female relationships are portrayed in another kind of music (preferably Caribbean; you could also discuss *modern* calypso). Compare and contrast the music you choose with colonial-era calypso, in terms of (alleged) sexism. How are women typically depicted? Do you or some people you know find some songs to be offensively sexist? Is this an important aspect of the music or not? Are such songs common, or are they exceptional and unrepresentative? Does the music offer any scope for female viewpoints to be expressed? What sort of role models for men and women does it provide? If the music you choose to focus on appears to differ substantially from colonial-era calypso in its representations of women, does this difference tell us anything about the differences between social norms in the two music cultures and/or periods?

11. In more than one classroom discussion of homophobia in dance-hall, Jamaican women voiced the most uncompromising and vehement hatred of homosexuals.

12. Cf. Roland Barthes regarding the "grain of the voice" (Especially as discussed in Middleton 263).

13. This, for example, was the line offered, with an appropriate smirk, by Latin rapper TNT (Tomas Robles) at a 1995 conference on Caribbean music held at Brooklyn college.

14. "Entre Copa y Copa" (originally a Mexica *ranchera*), by F. Valadés Leal and R. Cordero: "Between cup and cup my life is ebbing as I drunkenly weep over you; What bitter memories I have of your lies . . . I hope God punishes you for your treachery."

15. Beenie Man, while being interviewed by a student of mine, stated that he was in fact a monogamous, devoutly religious family man, and that the play-boy image was merely a commercial pose. He further asserted that he sang because God told him to, although, as she observed, "God did not specify what type of song should be sung" (Hannam 91).

16. E.g., Lady Saw's "Me No Want No Itsie-Bitsie Teenie-Weenie Man," and Patra's "Banana" ("I wanna hot cup o' tea in me saucer, forget about the rice, give me banana . . .").

17. Such frank pragmatism contrasts markedly with, for example, the ideal of passive womanhood and pristine monogamy celebrated by harlequin romances and their readers (see Radway). The difference involves not only that

(2.c.)

46 · *Popular Music and Society*

between middle-class, mainstream Anglo-American women and young Jamaicans, but also that between, on the one hand, a publishing industry consciously oriented toward female readers, and, on the other, a thoroughly male-dominated popular music scene (Douglass).

18. This logic was pursued further by Major Mackerel's subsequent "De Uglier de Gal, de Tighter de Hole."

19. One can well imagine the ambivalence that gay Jamaicans might feel toward Cooper's phrasing (142) when she writes that "homosexuality is gloriously vilified" by dance-hall deejays.

*Works Cited*

- Anderson, Beverley, and Winston Langley. "Popular Music and Gender in Jamaica." *Music of the Caribbean*. Ed. Beverley Anderson. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. 25-43.
- Aparicio, Frances. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, in press.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.
- Cooper, Carolyn. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. London: MacMillan, 1993; Duke UP, 1994.
- Douglass, Lisa. "Strictly Rockers Iyah: Sexual Politics of Jamaican Dance Hall Music." *Music of the Caribbean*. Ed. Beverley Anderson. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. 11-23.
- Gamman, Lorrain, and Margaret Marshment, eds. *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Seattle: Real Comet, 1989.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*. Ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis. London: Hutchinson, 1980. 128-38.
- Hamilton, Marlene. "Attitudes of Jamaican Adolescents Toward Popular 'Dance Hall' Music." *Music of the Caribbean*. Ed. Beverley Anderson. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. 45-54.
- Hannam, Sabrina. "Dancehall Reggae: Male Apathy and Female Exploitation?" *John Jay's Finest*. New York: John Jay College, 1997. 86-91.
- Koskoff, Ellen. "An Introduction to Women, Music, and Culture." *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Ellen Koskoff. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987. 1-23.
- Manuel, Peter. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- . "Chutney and Indo-Trinidadian Identity." *Popular Music* 17.1 (1998): 21-42.

*Gender Politics in Caribbean Popular Music* · 47

- Manuel, Peter, with Kenneth Bilby and Michael Largey. *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.
- Middleton, Richard. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes, England: Open UP, 1990.
- Miller, Daniel. *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach: Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad*. Providence: Berg, 1994.
- Morgan, Thais, ed. *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1994.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.
- Pacini Hernandez, Deborah. *Bachata: The Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.
- . "Music of Marginality: Social Identity and Class in Dominican bachata." Diss. Cornell University, 1989.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Rohlehr, Gordon. *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*. Port of Spain, 1990.
- Veléz, María Teresa. "The Trade of an Afro-Cuban Religious Drummer: Felipe Garc'a Villamil." 2 vol. Diss. Wesleyan University, 1996.
- Warner, Keith. *Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso: A Study of the Calypso as Oral Literature*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1985.
- White, Garth. *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley*. New York: Henry Holt, 1983.

**Peter Manuel 2-3-line bio please.**

Peter Manuel is associate professor at John Jay College of and the CUNY Graduate Center. His most recent book is *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (with M. Largey and K. Bilby).